



Mark Stiles' Secret

BY MARY ELSON PHILIPS.

ONE cold winter's evening two men were talking earnestly in a private room belonging to a certain restaurant just off Soho.

It was not a very reputable place, but that was precisely the reason why Ferdinand Horley chose it. Its owner was not a man of great reputation, nor above lending his aid in a transaction that many honest men would have turned their backs upon.

"Now, you have only to do your part," observed Ferdinand Horley, who possessed a long, thin face, weak eyes, and a general shiftness of manner.

"I believe I have thought of everything. But, for goodness' sake, keep Clara out of the way, Stiles. Any witness would ruin the whole thing. And my cousin Julian is an impressionable sort of fellow—a veritable fool, you might say. I only want him to quarrel with me, do you see? I'll provide cause enough, trust me. But any woman mixed up in the business would spoil the whole concern."

Mark Stiles nodded, as he curled his carefully waxed moustache.

His client was paying him a very stiff price for his share in the matter—that is, if it was successful. And the price was quite large enough to justify his closing his restaurant to the general public for one day. What mattered it if he chose to give his employees a holiday and superintend the dinner of just two guests with his own hands? True, there was his daughter Clara; but he could send her to spend the evening with some neighbors.

"I'll see to everything, Mr. Horley; you may trust me. Nothing shall interfere with your plans."

And, analyzed, they seemed simple enough, savoring of hospitality and a wish to do honour to his young cousin Julian, who had just succeeded to the family estate in Suffolk at the death of his father. Ferdinand Horley was his first cousin, and in the event of such a contingency happening—namely, that Julian should die without heirs—the estate would pass to himself.

Ferdinand, being a man "about town," not rich, but fairly comfortable in circumstances, was anxious that his cousin should not spend a lonely time any longer in his

fine but gloomy old mansion not far from Colchester. So he wrote him a pressing invitation.

"Come up and share my bachelor's loneliness, old chap, and we'll have a few pleasant days together."

Perhaps Ferdinand Horley felt he wanted something pleasant in his life just at present; for to contemplate bills that he could not pay and write that he could not evade was anything but a cheering prospect. He argued to himself that he was uncommonly hardy used. Here was a young fellow of three-and-twenty, who had never known a moment's care, after a brief but brilliant career at school and college, suddenly tumbling into a position of ease and plenty for the remainder of his life; while here was he, himself, just on the verge of bankruptcy, living from hand to mouth, dependent on the mercy of his tormenting creditors. Why they had been so long suffering he hardly knew, except, perhaps, it might be on account of the little fiction he invented of Julian's exceedingly frail state of health, which might result in sudden collapse at any moment.

But in time that would do no good. His position was really desperate. Then, after a long evening's thinking, a new light had gleamed in his eyes, not a pleasant one, and he got up hastily, found pen and paper, and wrote off to his cousin.

The result of the letter was satisfactory. Julian would willingly exchange the gloomy surroundings of his ancestral home, where he knew so few friends, for the delights of gay London.

But he did not mention to his cousin there was yet another inducement for his acceptance. Mrs. Molyneux, his nearest neighbour in the district, was to be in town, and Fedore, her daughter, accompanied her. Ferdinand Horley was deeply in love with Fedore, having met her several times at his uncle's house in Southam. But Julian had won her heart.

"You are going to town, too?" she said in her sweet, winning manner, when he apprised her of his intention. "How delightful. I will see that mother sends you a card for my birthday ball. It is on the 26th of January. And, of course, we must not forget your cousin, Mr. Horley, as you will be staying with him."

This was said demurely, with eyes a little downcast. Fedore was a beautiful girl, gifted with strong intuitive power. She knew a good man from a bad one. And she never liked nor trusted Ferdinand Horley. His face haunted her with its weak, shifty expression and eyes that never looked quite straight at her.

As the travelers elected to reach London on the same day, and chose the same train by which to travel, it was not an unlikely thing but that the young fellow would eschew the smoking-carriage and beg permission to seat himself in the compartment with Mrs. Molyneux and her pretty daughter. So when the terminus was reached a very unpleasant surprise was in store for Ferdinand Horley, and one that made him clench his hands for a second and gnash his teeth with rage. For no sooner did the train empty itself of its passengers than Ferdinand perceived his cousin Julian with two ladies in tow—one elderly, the other the pretty Fedore, whom he had long secretly worshipped.

Now, what on earth were they doing in London? And why must they choose this very time, when he most wanted his cousin all to himself? It seemed, after all, as if a woman was going to complicate things.

Yet he was thoroughly master of himself in a moment, and advanced with smiling face to greet the arrivals.

"What a charming surprise!" he said, as he shook hands with the ladies. "Julian, you humbug! I know now why you were anxious to exchange a country existence for a town one!"

He looked longingly into Fedore's beautiful face, with its piquant expression. He had never seen her look so supremely happy. And there was a little lingering over the farewells between the young people that made him feel downright savage. The brougham was waiting for Mrs. Molyneux and her daughter. But Julian insisted on seeing them into it.

"Remember, we expect you on the 26th!" she said. Then she waved her hand, and the ladies drove away.

When they were gone Julian saw to his own luggage, and when Ferdinand was seated with him in the hansom he turned to him and wrung his hand in gratitude.

"Good old chap to ask me up!" he said rapturously. "I'm going to have a rattling good time, too! The Molyneuxs—"

He stopped short. There was a look upon his cousin's face he did not understand. It was almost scornful.

"I say, Julian, hold on! You've come up to stay with me, haven't you? But you seemed to be making arrangements without any reference to that."

"Oh, it's only for Thursday, the 26th. Mrs. Molyneux has asked us both. They have a kid's party on, and I promised—"

"Oh, well, we won't quarrel over that!" exclaimed his cousin pleasantly. "We'll dine together quietly, you and I; and then we'll put in an appearance at the kid's party."

No more was said, but Julian saw enough in the few minutes he had spent in his cousin's company to know that something ailed Ferdinand. Perhaps the poor chap was hard up. He must get him to confide in him. Perhaps he could do something for him. It was deuced hard lines to be hard up, especially when one was not used to it.

II.

Clara Stiles was surprised beyond measure when she was told there would be no work for her that evening. She scarcely credited her father when he informed her the restaurant would be closed to the public all day. Only two visitors would dine there in the evening, and they were Mr. Ferdinand Horley and his cousin, Mr. Julian.

Clara pursed up her lips ominously. She hated Mr. Ferdinand Horley. He had tried to trifle with her; once he had met her upon the stairs in a dark corner, and had even dared to kiss her. She had wiped away the insult with as sound a box upon the ear as the situation allowed. But the matter raked in her mind. Years ago, her father had been butler and valet to Mr. Ferdinand's uncle. She supposed Mr. Julian was the heir; but what sort of a man he could be to be on friendly terms with his cousin Ferdinand she could only guess at. She was sorry for him, if he were a nice young fellow; if not, it did not matter.

Permission was given to Clara to pay her friends a visit that evening, but it was a permission of which she was not able to avail herself; for a terrible headache attacking her, she was only able to lie down upon her small bed in the room over the dining apartment, and for a long time she lost all consciousness.

She did not know that her father with his own hands laid the little table for dinner for the two guests, drawing it into the cosy corner sheltered by a large folding screen from the rest of the room.

Here, with a bright fire burning, the flames lighting up the ruddy tint of the good old claret put to warm by the fender, the wax candles sending a soft, mellow light upon the silver and flowers decorating the dinner-table, was a veritable paradise when the wind was bitterly cold outside, and snow already beginning to fall.

So thought Julian Horley when he stepped into it in company with his cousin Ferdinand. The latter was paler than usual, and seemed a trifle nervous.

"It's an out-of-the-way place, old fellow," he said in apology, as they were coming along in the hansom. "But you remember Stiles? He's started the restaurant, and for the sake of old times I give him a turn when I can. Anyhow, it's better than anything my old landlady could do for us."

Julian, with his heart in a rapturous tumult when he remembered the delight in store for him—for they had promised to be at Grosvenor Square by nine—was in a humour to be pleased with anything.

And the pretty table filled him with admiration.

"After all, there's nothing like an English winter," he said. "When I think of all the years I spent abroad traveling in search of pleasure, as I called it, why, it strikes me I left the best part of it behind in the old country."

And his thoughts flew back to the fair face he loved so. All the while he had been abroad she had been growing up into the sweet, charming girl he now found her. He was glad he had not wasted longer time abroad.

"Next year, old chap, we'll dine together at Southam Hall. But I'm glad to keep you company tonight," he remarked, as they sat down to dine.

Julian not forgetting to greet Mark Stiles with a pleasant, frank smile.

"Why, Mark, you look younger than ever!"

To which Mark bowed. He had been in good service, and knew exactly how to behave himself.

"It's the same to you, sir, I'm thinking," he said. "But we don't any of us grow younger."

Then the dinner was brought in, and very excellent it was. But Julian noticed how little Ferdinand ate, also that he seemed to grow more and more moody as the courses succeeded each other. What had come to him Julian scarcely knew, but he grew fractious and peevish, then downright quarrelsome. Once or twice Julian had to bite his lips to prevent a hasty answer which might have provoked further strife.

And he was drinking a great deal of wine, that he noticed also, his face getting redder and redder as the dinner progressed.

Julian heartily wished it over, but there was dessert to be got through yet. If only he could hold his tongue and not reply to his cousin's insulting remarks all might yet be well. At last came the climax. With an insidious smile, Ferdinand made some disparaging remark about Fedore Molyneux.

"I suppose the old woman wants to trap you?" he said coarsely. "She tried for me till you succeeded to the estate. Now, of course, you are the bigger fish to land. That's why she followed you up here, I suppose, and brought the pretty Fedore to bait her hook with."

A scornful laugh followed the words. Julian, stung beyond endurance, threw down his knife and fork, and sat up squarely.

"What do you mean by that, Ferdinand? Apologize this moment, if you do not wish me to leave the table and your society."

Ferdinand chuckled inwardly. His scheme was succeeding beyond his hopes.

"I shan't apologize!" he said, with a growl. "I mean every word I said. They're a pair of them—mother and daughter. You're not the first man they've angled for, I'll wager. You're an easily gulled fool, and they know it."

The next instant a pair of strong hands were at his throat.

"Unsay those words," said Julian in his ear. "Unsay them, or I'll throttle you!"

The two closed together like a couple of maniacs. But Julian had the advantage. He was of taller stature, and more muscular make. Or it might be that his cousin allowed him the advantage. His blood was up. Ferdinand had openly insulted the girl he loved, and her mother also.

But he did not know the cunning subterfuge with which he was surrounded. After vainly endeavoring to throw him, Julian saw his advantage, and with a quick movement dashed his adversary back. With a heavy crash he fell, his head coming in contact with the sharp edge of the fender. There he lay, prone and motionless, a streak of blood making its way down his face, and streaming on to his immaculate shirt front.

This was the signal. In rushed Mark Stiles, angry and indignant at his room being turned, as he expressed it, into "pot-house and brawling tavern."

"You've done it now, Mr. Julian!" he exclaimed. "By jove, but you've killed him!"

White as a statue the young man leaned over the prostrate body.

He placed his hand upon the heart. There was not the faintest movement. The wounded man's jaw seemed to drop, his head rolled back upon the floor, his eyes went up till nothing but the whites were visible.

The two men stared at each other, dismay apparently upon the face of both.

"My soul! What shall I do?" burst at length from Julian's trembling lips. He was shaking from head to foot like an aspen leaf.

"Bolt! Now! This very instant—while the coast is clear! Be out of England before the alarm is raised. 'Tis your only safety."

"But you'll swear it was only an accident!" gasped the awestruck Julian. "He taunted me beyond endurance. I had to close with him to avenge the insult—"

Stiles shrugged his shoulders and pointed to the body.

"What'll the police believe of that, Mr. Julian? You know as well as I do. If you don't want to pass the night in a police-cell—if you don't want to hang by the neck for murder, bolt and quickly. I'll swear you shall have time enough for that."

Before he could reach the door his way was barred.

A girl with dark hair and pale cheeks pressed into the room.

"Father, father! what means all this noise? Ah, ah!" she shrieked in terror at the sight she saw.

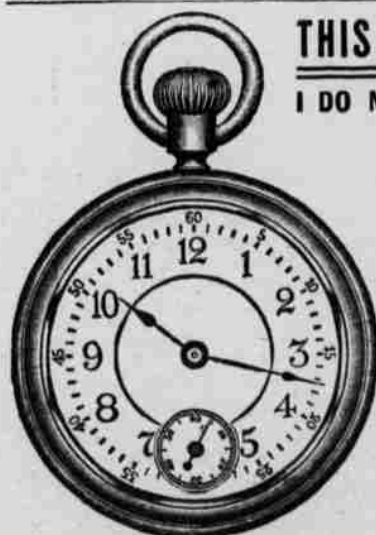
Her father, vexed beyond measure at her entrance, could not hide the state of the case.

"A quarrel, Clara. Out of the way there! Stand back, and let the murderer get off clear."

It was an awful word—it was an awful moment. Face to face with the young man did Clara stand. And his features were burnt into her memory with a touch quite indelible. There was the contracted brow, the working of the lips, the look of horror and frenzy in the half-opened mouth.

In spite of all, her woman's pity rose. She left the room quickly, following him and was just in time to stay him at the door.

(Continued on page 12)



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| 5 By the sea waves. | 21 I make this proposition to no one but you. | 38 You can depend on me for the balance. |
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| 7 You are expected. | 23 The future looks dark to me. | 40 You can plainly see how miserable I am. |
| 8 This is awful. | 24 Home was never like this. | 41 The Widow's Mite (might). [last] |
| 9 Here's something to look into. | 25 I hardly know how to start. | 42 I've grown a couple of feet since I saw you. |
| 10 Yes, I got home all right, all right. | 26 Words are poor means to express my feelings. | 43 I ran into an old acquaintance. |
| 11 I have a very perplexing problem on my hands. | 27 In my simple way I drop you a line. | 44 My work is a steady grind. |
| 12 What do you think about it? | 28 I will be up as soon as possible. | 45 I entertained last evening. |
| 13 The way I feel. | 29 It was a great blow out. | 46 Watching the sun (son) rise. |
| 14 I am doing a rushing (Russian) bustle. | 30 I caught cold. | 47 I did not expect you to go off so soon. |
| 15 Love at first sight. | 31 I felt rather small. | 48 Once is enough. |
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